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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

22 September 1980

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Soviet Reactions to Iraq-Iran Hostilities

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The Soviets have long been concerned that a military clash between Iran and Iraq would damage their relations with both countries, and are worried that such a clash might lead Tehran to reduce its hostility to the US. Consequently, they probably believe their interests are best served by an early cessation of the conflict. Thus far, however, they have tried to maintain a balanced position in order to avoid alienating either Baghdad or Tehran. The major escalation in the fighting now underway, however, could make it difficult for the Soviets to maintain this balance and lead them to adopt more active policies designed to bring about a resolution of the conflict and to enhance the Soviet position in the process.

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Moscow's first response to such an escalation in the fighting may be to offer its "good offices" as mediator as it did between India and Pakistan in 1965. The USSR would hope that a successful Soviet mediation effort would enhance its position in both Tehran and Baghdad and facilitate the USSR's emergence as a key regional security player. The Soviets probably would also see a mediatory role as an opportunity to exploit the lack of US diplomatic ties with either Tehran or Baghdad.

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Should Iraq move to permanently occupy Iranian territory, the Soviets might attempt to manipulate their arms supply relationship with Iraq to induce it to desist. It is doubtful, however, that the Soviets

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would actually threaten a cut-off. They are anxious to avoid damaging their ties with Baghdad and forcing it to look to the West for arms. The Soviets are more likely to send a subtle message to the Iraqis, perhaps by slowing the delivery of arms already promised, in order to warn Iraq of the risks of future military actions. [redacted]

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It is very unlikely the Soviets would undertake any major air resupply effort to Iraq. [redacted]

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[redacted] The Soviets would fear that an airlift almost certainly would alienate Tehran and could induce the Iranians to look to Western sources for spare parts for its US-manufactured military hardware. In addition, a Soviet rapid resupply effort would enable Iraq to prolong the fighting--something the Soviets want to prevent. [redacted]

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The Soviets might also hope that Iran's weakened position vis-a-vis Iraq would create an opportunity for the USSR to enter into a substantial arms supply program with Iran. It is unlikely, however, that Moscow thinks such an opportunity will develop during the heat of an Iraqi-Iranian conflict nor if Iran is humiliated by Soviet-supplied Iraqi arms. [redacted]

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If the Soviets think Iraq is seeking to control substantial portions of Iran--such as the oil fields--pressure on them to act more strongly will increase and their actions will be more unpredictable. The Soviets have little interest in seeing Iraq emerge as an even stronger power in the Persian Gulf. Their influence and leverage in Baghdad is already limited. Even more compelling to Moscow will be concern that a major Iraqi invasion will lead to an Iranian-US rapprochement. The USSR may also fear that such a move could lead to the fragmentation of Iran and US exploitation of the resulting chaos. In order to deter a major Iraqi move into Iran, the Soviets may, therefore, warn Baghdad that the USSR would intervene in Iran to protect its interests along its southern border. Should such a warning fail to sway Iraq, the Soviets might move into bordering areas of Iran or seek to ensure that any new regime in Tehran is pro-Soviet. It is also conceivable that the Soviets could see the new situation as a major opportunity to develop a close relationship with Tehran and--in a reversal of alliances similar to that which took place in the Horn of Africa in 1977-78--back Iran openly. [redacted]

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